

1/29/14

We seem to be devolving. Last fall and winter, we had the odd pattern of a mediocre walk (in terms of number of species) followed by a record, followed by a fallow field, followed by a bountiful crop. This year we have week 1, a new record; week 2, just slivering past the median; week 3, new record; week 4, all of our slithering left us below the median; week 5, tie the old record. We observed 124 birds scattered among 27 species. We matched the record set last year, bested the median of 19, almost doubled up on the lowest score of 14 set back in 2004, and saw five first time species for the year.

See the plots at http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html and

http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm

As I just mentioned, we had several first species sightings for the year. The first came in the form of white-throated swifts, swirling high over California Blvd. at the beginning of the walk. They were at long range, even for Alec, but he managed to get a good enough look and a just good enough photo to demonstrate the white underpinnings. We got a better view on the back end of the walk as we crossed California along Wilson. At least three of us (Vicky, myself, and Alec) had swifts flying through the same



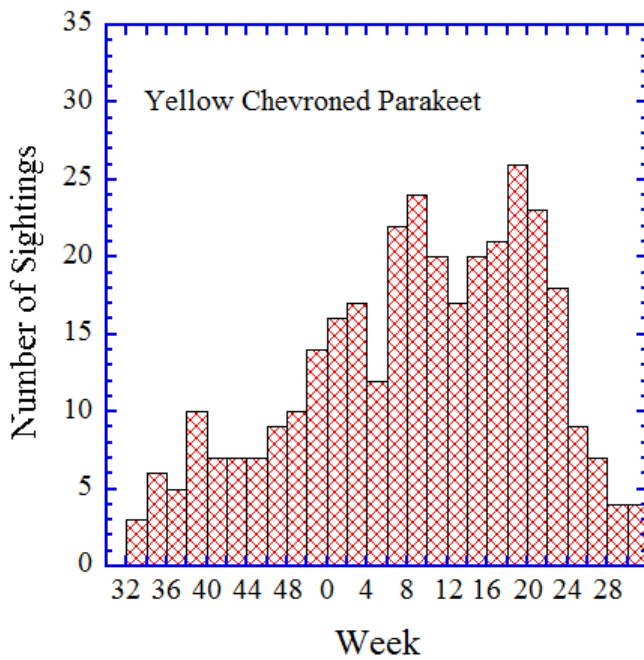
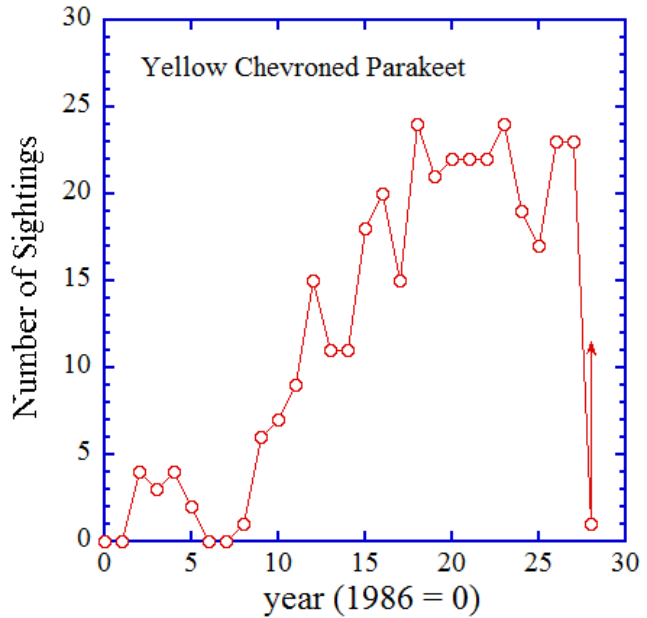
field of view as the soaring Cooper's hawk in the background, which happened to be another first bird of the year. It reminded me of watching birds fly across the disk of the moon.

Although we ended with three *Selasphorus* hummingbirds, Alec picked up the first confirmed sighting of the year in Morrisroe's back yard. We owe Kent for sorting out a spotted towhee from the shading bushes along Avery's driveway. I didn't get there in time for a shot, so I toss in a photo I took a couple months ago in Sierra Madre. The towhee was a very good capture for us but the bird of the week has to be the green one we all heard near Prufrock.



So, the bird of the week is green and mildly noisy. What else can I tell you? We have been getting this species mostly on flyovers and vocalizations over the last year, so our two birds ensured bird of the week status by deigning to land in a viewable spot. They perched long enough in a tree next to Prufrock to provide a good viewing and they sat for portraits, although

at a high angle. We also saw one checking out a palm tree behind Prufrock. The photo shows one of our birds. It's a bit washed out (nothing PhotoShop couldn't fix) but you can easily make out the yellow blaze on the wing. Also note the eye-ring and the pink bill and legs, all of which are consistent with a yellow-chevrons parakeet. The only thing potentially like it in southern California is a white-winged parakeet, which was regarded as a subspecies with yellow-chevrons parakeets until 1997 (that pesky DNA strikes again). In principle, distinguishing between yellow-chevrons parakeets and white-winged parakeets is quite difficult unless you can see them in flight where the white will



show, if it exists. You can sometimes see the white under the yellow shoulder in repose and are invariably treated to it in images floating around on the web but you can't count on it in real life. The call of the white-winged parakeets is a little lower pitched if you have your ears really tuned and, if you get a close look, the lores are bare, yielding a gray appearance—note green in this area in the photo). However, this discussion is a bit moot for Caltech because white-winged parakeets have gone the way of spotted doves in southern California and are now somewhere between quite rare and extirpated (there were ~20 birds in southern California a decade ago). So, if you see a parakeet that looks vaguely like a yellow-chevrons parakeet around Caltech, it probably is one. They started invading the Caltech area in force in

the mid-nineties (see figure), are still frequently seen or heard on campus, and we are now entering prime time for sightings, as shown in the histogram. White-winged parakeets are still fairly common in southern Florida and there have been a few recent sightings in the Bay area, where numbers are also down. For us, it is looking quite grim. White-winged parakeets were popular cage birds in the 1970s (new revenue stream for importers and smugglers after the high grade ore of gray-cheeked parakeets played out) and they, in turn, were supplanted by yellow-chevrons parakeets. Generally, yellow-chevrons parakeets come to Caltech to eat seeds from the pods of silk floss trees. We may also get the odd breeding pair if the birds are lucky enough to gain possession of an old woodpecker cavity (they will also work with dead fronds in date palms if the tree hasn't been cleaned out in a few years). The fact that we saw two is suspicious in a hopeful sense. Unfortunately, Caltech has seen fit to remove almost all of the pods from our silk floss trees. This was either simply stupid (the same people who brought us

deadheading of the salvia in front of Arms, a great way to kill them) or a studied but stupid hedge against liability. The net effect is likely to be a drop in the number of sightings this year



I close with a couple of not bird of the week walk photos. The first is a black phoebe taken near Holliston. Apart from the composition, I like this shot because it shows a light-dark contrast. In describing one of Alec's photos a couple of weeks ago I noted that his black phoebe appeared brown, in large part because of the lighting. The photo here shows a dark brown in sunlight and black where the shade takes him, all in one bird. The second photo shows an acorn woodpecker. You will notice that the red cap on the head sits back and, in detail, you can see that black

separates the red from the white region above the bill. So, this is a female. A male would have displayed a much more extensive red cap and had no red-black boundary on the forehead. So, the photo is good enough for determining sex but sexing potential is not why I like this photo. My appreciation comes from the filtering crackle glaze formed by the black feathers drifting down into the breast. The view of the breast alone is definitive versus a downy or Nuttall's woodpecker but, since acorn woodpeckers are rarely a tough call, it's a matter of understated aesthetics. If you want high art, whether subtle or bombastic, don't bother with galleries or museums. Look to nature. With acorn woodpeckers, you get it all in one place.



The date: 1/29/2014

The week number: 5

The walk number: 1232

The weather: 76 F, partly cloudy

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Alec Brenner, John Beckett, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Vicky Brennan, Kent Potter

The birds (27):

1 Northern Mockingbird

- 1 House Sparrow
- 12 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 4 Acorn Woodpecker
- 5 American Crow
- 5 White-throated Swift
- 3 Mallard
- 1 European Starling
- 3 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 4 Common Raven
- 30 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 3 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 3 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 2 Bewick's Wren
- 5 Townsend's Warbler
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 3 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 20 Bushtit
- 2 Yellow-chevroned Parakeet
- 5 Cedar Waxwing
- 1 Spotted Towhee
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
2/5/14